



Swedish Naming Customs

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Have you been confused by a first or last name in Swedish records? Maybe you cannot find your ancestor because their given name was recorded differently? Or, maybe their last name changed completely? But why would a person change their last name? The answers to these questions depend on the time-period, social standing, and the laws at the time. Let's start with given names, then to surnames, and finally look at tips for genealogists.

Medieval – 1500's

Given Names

During Viking and early Medieval times people used old Germanic names such as Erik, Torbjörn, Gunhild, and Estri. When Christianity arrived, many given names from the bible and liturgical calendar became popular for example, Andreas, Johannes, Maria, and Christina which later might become Anders, Johan, Maja, and Stina.

You will also see that some given names were more popular within a region. People with advanced education, the clergy, and the burghers (in cities) often changed their given names to a latin or greek form, for example: Olof to Olai, Björn to Bero, or Petter to Petri.

Surnames

Before the 1500's very few people used hereditary surnames the way we do. Most people used place names to be identified in the village or to a farm, for example: Aslak i Frölunda. By the late 1500's and early 1600's the practice of using surnames spread from the nobility¹, to the educated and the clergy, to the burghers in the cities, and the peasants in rural areas. The practice of using a surname didn't have cultural root in Sweden but instead came largely from Germany and England. Let's look at each group:

Nobility

The nobility was the first group to use family surnames by using a patronymic name (father's given name with the ending of -sson or -dotter) to be identified to their father. Other members of nobility created a surname in various ways. Some used single or double words to create one by describing a family shield, or using the names of animals, plants, weapons, or place names.²

¹ The House of Nobility was created in 1626 which required family genealogies and registration.

² For example: Ulf (wolf), Örnflycht (eagle flight), Gyllensvärd (golden sword), Söderhielm (southern helmet)

Educated, Clergy, and Burghers

Some educated and clergy kept their patronymic surname. Others changed their surname to a Latin form such as: Karlsson to Caroli, or Erichsson to Erichius. The burghers³ used Latin forms as well as Greek and German endings such as: -ander, -zel, and -man.

Peasants

Peasants in rural area traditionally used their patronymic surname

Peasants who moved to cities often changed their last names to become more unique and modern.

1600's – 1901

The time of Sweden's wars and expansion in the 1600's brought names from other countries especially France and Germany. Names from other countries become popular in the 1700's starting in the larger cities and by the 1800's throughout the rest of the country.

The burghers in the cities followed the example of the nobility but did not use terms that were associated to nobility. They often combined two words to create a surname for example Ek and Berg to make Ekberg. Or perhaps the first in the family to move to the city used a variant form based on their place or origin, combined with an ending such as -ström, -berg, or -man, for example: someone from Nordmaling using Nord and -ström to create Nordström. The farming class traditionally continued to use patronymic surnames.

With increased population and cultural shifts in society, by the mid-1800's many people had common given names with patronymic and non-patronymic surnames all over the kingdom. By the late 1800's many people started using a patronymic surname as a set family surname.

Children born out of wedlock

Some illegitimate children were given unusual first names because 1. The unwed mother may have been employed as a household servant by the borgare and was influenced by non-traditional names, and 2. Having a child out of wedlock had a negative social stigma so the mother might break from family traditions. In rare cases, you will see a matronymic surname based on the mother's given name.

Military Surnames

Military surnames were assigned by the commanding officer or may have been assigned to the soldier (or navy sailors) residence⁴. When the military service ended, many went back to using their patronymic name. Other members in the family (i.e. wife of children) may or may not have used the soldier surname. Some families kept the military surname over multiple generations.

³ a citizen of a town or city, typically a member of the wealthy bourgeoisie

⁴ Military surnames were often assigned to the residence between the 1680's – early 1900's and would have been used by whoever the soldier (or navy sailor) was at the time. The surname cannot be used to assume relationship to the previous or subsequent soldier (or navy sailor.)

With the increase in population by the mid-1800's many people who had a common first name with a common patronymic surname decided to change their surname to something else. They often follow the pattern of people living in the cities.

If an ancestor changed their last name before 1901 then you should look for the change in the parish records. This is often seen with the word "född" meaning the person was born with another surname, for example "född" Olofsson. In cases of the military, the patronymic name might be mentioned on the first or last registration in the muster rolls.

1901 – Present

Prior to the Name Ordinance of 1901, a person could change their last name to almost whatever they want. The regulation also encouraged all Swede's to use a set family surname. The 1920 Swedish marriage law required a woman to take her husband's surname at the time of marriage.

If the last name was changed after 1901 then there should be a record of it with the Swedish National Archives (Riksarkivet) within the Swedish Ministry of Education⁵, with records preserved between 1901 and 1947. After 1947 the patent and registration office⁶ in Söderhamn handled the records of changing surnames. The Name Ordinance of 1901 was revised in 1919, 1920, 1921, 1922, 1931, 1946, and 1962. The ordinance was legally replaced by the Personal Names Act of 1963 which was dominated by the idea that name stability was in the public interest.⁷ The practice of using a patronymic name based on a father's given name was outlawed in 1966. Another Names Act was passed in 1982 which was very liberal, essentially anyone can change their surname to be almost anything they want⁸ if it has a linguistic form that fits well in Sweden. Most recently the Swedish government proposed a naming law bill which took effect July 1, 2017.

Tips for Genealogists

1. The tradition to name a child after a grandparent, for example 1st son after the father's father, 2nd son after mother's father, and 3rd son after the father, with the same pattern for daughters and mothers was "tradition" not law.
2. There are many ways to spell personal names, so be flexible when reading records or searching databases.

⁵ Ecklesiastikdepartementet was a department handling reform between 1840 to 31 December, 1967.

⁶ Patent- och registreringsverket (PRV)

⁷ Brylla, Eva. The Swedish Personal Names Act 1982..., 23:2005 p. 73

⁸ Many are changing their name to sound more anglicized by translating their name into English, others are using nobility sounding or nobility names that have died out if it is not prominent in the culture or history.

3. A female born in the time of patronymics who lived into the late 1800's might have a different patronymic surname, i.e. maiden name Larsdotter to Larsson, or her husband's patronymic surname.
4. If one parent was previously widowed, then some couples will name their first child (of the deceased's gender) after the deceased spouse.
5. A child's given name might have been influenced by the priest. For example, a child's name might be written in the Latin form in the birth record, and a common variant in the household records (i.e. Petrus in the birth record and Pär in the household record.)
6. Some given names are interchangeable such as: Johannes, Johan, John, Jon, Jöns, Jan, and Jaen. A good list of interchangeable names can be found at: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Sweden_Names,_Personal
7. As some given names were more popular within a region, combined with patronymics, you'll find there are many people with similar names in an area. Use additional evidence to support relationship conclusions.
8. When a person changed their last name, there is no guarantee that anyone in the family changed their surname name too (some did and some did not.)
9. In Dalarna and Gotland people used the residential farm name as part of their name. The farm was before the given name i.e. Liss Lars Olsson (Lissgården) in Dalarna. It was before (if a hired hand) and after (if belonging to the owners) in Gotland.⁹
10. Before 1901 it's not unusual to see multiple generations using different non-patronymic last names.

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⁹ Kjöllerström, Per August, *Svensk Namnbok. Dopnamn, Ättenamn, Ortnamn*, p. 125